

Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus
USS Frank E. Petersen Jr. Shipnaming
MCAS Cherry Point, NC
09 November 2016

Good afternoon Cherry Point, and happy birthday Marines.

What the Navy and Marine Corp uniquely gives this country is presence – around the globe, around the clock – being where we need to be not just at the right time, but all the time.

We get there faster, we stay longer, we bring everything we need with us & because we operate from sovereign United States territory, we don't have to ask any other nation's permission to get the job done.

To get that presence requires grey hulls on the horizon – grey hulls whose flight decks launch and recover aircraft and project power ashore. So we've reversed the decline in shipbuilding and the attrition of aircraft that began in 2001. In the seven

years before I took office, the Navy put 41 ships under contract.

It wasn't enough to keep our ship yards in business.

In the seven years since 2009, we've contracted for 86 ships, and we've done so while increasing aircraft purchases by 35% - We'll get back to 300 ships by 2019. We'll get to 308 by 2023.

One of my most important responsibilities is to name all these ships. Each ship class pays tribute to a place, a battle, a person. So this morning, Camp Lejeune, I named Bougainville – a big deck amphib after one of the longest marine battles in the second world war. We have other amphibians - Belleau Wood, Bataan, and Iwo Jima.

We name our destroyers after Navy and Marine Corps heroes.

In the past few months, I had the privilege of naming ships after

Colonel Barney Barnum and Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone, General Chesty Puller. Honoring those Marines who been great in combat, but have also blazed a trail that everyone in the Corps follows today.

Today we honor a Marine who was both a hero in combat and a pioneer of civil rights, Lieutenant General Frank E. Petersen, Jr. Frank Petersen grew up in Kansas, went to segregated schools. He enrolled in Washburn University in Topeka when he was 17 years old, then, against the wishes of his mother, he enlisted in the Navy when he turned 18. President Harry S. Truman had only desegregated the military just two years before.

After acing his Navy entrance exam, a recruiter told Frank to retake the test, he thought he had cheated. And then, when he did it again the recruiter then told Frank that he would be a

“great steward” because of his race – at that time, black Marines and Sailors were primarily longshoremen, laborers and stewards. In 1951, there were only 3 African American officers in the U.S. Marine Corps.

However, Frank Petersen, motivated by stories of Korean War pilot, Jesse L. Brown, the Navy’s first black aviator, Frank Petersen vowed to, and earned, his Wings of Gold.

After first serving as seaman apprentice and electronics technician, Frank entered the Naval Aviation Cadet Program in 1951 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1952, joining the few, the proud, and becoming the first African American pilot to call himself a Marine. But becoming a Marine Corps officer wasn’t enough to end his encounters with racism.

While training in Florida, he was removed from a public bus because he refused to sit in the back. On his first day assigned to Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, a captain accused Frank of masquerading as a lieutenant and had him arrested. And then in Hawaii, a landlord refused to rent a house to him because he is race.

Even though he was treated, all too often, as a second-class citizen, Frank Petersen was a first-class patriot, a first-class pilot, and a first-class Marine. Over his career he flew 350 combat missions during two tours, in Korea and in Vietnam. And in Vietnam he successfully bailed out and evaded the enemy after his F-4 Phantom was shot down in 1968 until he could be rescued. He later became the first African American to command a fighter squadron, the famous Black Knights, the first

to command an air group, and the first to command a major base.

When he finally retired - 38 years after he first put on the uniform - Frank Petersen was a 3-star General, the senior ranking aviator in the Marine Corps and the Navy, also known as the “Silver Hawk” and the “Gray Eagle”, and he was the commander of the Combat Development Command in Quantico, VA.

He, like all great leaders, led by example. He committed himself to institutional change in order to make it better for those who followed in his footsteps. He was special assistant to the Commandant; he sought to eradicate barriers among recruits from different backgrounds, different experiences, different lives. General Petersen noted that promotions, job assignments,

and punishments “were the three areas where racism was most likely to rear its ugly head” So those became his focus, and he made visible improvements.

In his words, sometimes, “The signs of (those improvements) are subtle. As you go off a base, look around. If you see a white kid and a black kid going off together to have a beer, you know that you’ve achieved a degree of success.” And he recognized that while the military was “originally recalcitrant”, it had “led the charge” and was a model of for the rest of the country. Even so, when asked had there been enough progress, he would respond, “never.”

That is why, in the Navy and Marine Corps, we knock down barriers. We’ve continued to do that across the Marine Corps – across the Navy. Every time we’ve done that - When we

integrated the Navy, when we integrated women into the service, when we repealed “don’t ask, don’t tell,” when we opened up ground combat positions to women, every time those changes were proposed – every time – there were naysayers, like Frank Petersen’s flight instructor who told him he would never fly, and others saying the force would be weakened and unit morale would decrease.

And yet, our Navy and Marine Corps remain the most powerful expeditionary fighting force the world has ever known. We’re a stronger force because we are a diverse force. When we talk about diversity, the main thing we’re talking about is diversity of background, diversity of thought and perspective.

To fight and win, now and in the future, we must recruit, train, and develop a Navy and Marine Corps from the entirety of

America's talent pool, representative and reflective of the nation they defend.

So, we name destroyers after Navy and Marine Corps heroes.

Destroyers can simultaneously execute undersea warfare, surface warfare, air warfare, and missile defense. In other words, like Marines, they are capable our battles in the air, on land, and sea.

We are building a lot of these, and as we do, we assign them a sponsor to represent the values of the namesake of the ship. A sponsor imbues a ship with her spirit and her personality. She remains in communication with that ship for its lifetime. This ship is going to have a very special sponsor. Darcy Neller, wife of the Commandant of the Marine Corps, as the sponsor of our Navy's newest destroyer.

I'm privileged to name our next destroyer - DDG-121, USS

Frank E. Petersen, Jr.